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‘Thinking with the uterine’
Maria Fannin

Commentary on ‘Cyborg uterine geography: complicating care and social reproduction’ by Sophie Lewis for *Dialogues in Human Geography*

Sophie Lewis’s essay presents an expansive reading of the literature on pregnancy, birth, and parenting in geography, and reads these accounts against diverse texts such as Maggie Nelson’s memoir *The Argonauts*, the writings of evolutionary biologist Suzanne Sadedin, and exemplary accounts of queer family making and DIY gynecology. Lewis also dwells on Bracha Ettinger’s concept of the matrixial and the challenge this concept poses to assumptions about kinship, identity and relatedness, as well as the possibilities it offers for re-imagining vertical and horizontal relationships. The essay draws on these rich sources and others to stage a dialogue on the disparate ways geographers grapple with the complexities of bodily forms of ‘care’ and ‘social reproduction.’ It proposes the novel concept of a ‘uterine geography’ as a way to, in Lewis’s words, bring together ‘indigenous midwifery, surrogacy, underground abortion providers, co-parenting, gamete donation’ as well as ‘mitochondrial transfers (a new technique yielding ‘three-parent babies’), shelters for queer homeless people, womb transplants, polymaternalism and “death doulas”’ in a way that other concepts cannot (Lewis 2017, 30). The essay asserts the presence of the body as fact and also rhetorical figure in such a forceful and determined way, for there is both an engagement with what could be called a ‘materialist’ account of the uterus – as tissue, muscle, flesh – and with processual accounts of what the uterine *does*. Lewis refers to this doing as the act of ‘holding and letting go’ and offers a rich and often critical opening up of the uterine to stand in for much more than the individual maternal body, containing (or not) a fetus. There is so much in this essay to engage with, from close readings of work on maternity in geography – and the desire to queer these texts – to accounts of the very real life or death stakes at issue in pregnancy, mothering, giving birth, giving over to another, and taking care. In this sense, Lewis’ essay speaks eloquently to a diverse set of new feminist geographical approaches to pregnancy, care, and reproductive biopolitics (see for example Schurr 2016, McNiven 2016, Freeman 2017).

The essay moves from readings of the various recent efforts to theorise social reproduction, the placenta, lively biology, the womb as ‘environment,’ surrogacy, fetal-maternal microchimerism, and parenting cultures, among other subjects to put several arguments to work: first, to challenge geographers to trouble their accounts of (predominantly heterosexual, ‘natural’) pregnancy as a wholly affirmative life event or experience and become better attuned to the negative and to the estrangement, suffering, and pain of pregnancy and birth. Second, to call for attention to the ‘uterine’ as the locus and site for critical theoretical and empirical interventions that cut across different, often disparate and isolated debates, and to develop a more expansive and critical approach to gestation and all its complexities in those fields where the author suggests much more could be done: theories of the non-human, more-than-human, biopolitics. .

Lewis deftly maneouvres around debates that have preoccupied feminist theorists and philosophers of pregnancy, attempting to put different sources into difficult conversation to ‘stay with the trouble’ of gestation, citing Haraway’s felicitous phrase. The essay is most critical of what Lewis identifies as the tendency to romanticize pregnancy and birth, and although citing some eographical accounts

specifically, the romanticisation of pregnancy and birth is also conveyed as a broader cultural dynamic. Offered in contrast is the brief description by Suzanne Sadedin, from her perspective as an evolutionary biologist, of the biological 'violence' of birth. Sadedin provides an account 'without a subject' that might seem to speak to new feminist materialist sensibilities of the contingencies of life. Her focus seems to be on the species rather than individual is the subject of the long time frame of biological mutation, adaptation and selection. But I wondered what precisely this account of pregnancy and birth could say to literatures that seek to offer birth givers a de-pathologised account of the pregnant and birthing body's capacities for endurance, strength and pleasure? Or of the call to consider the scientific discourse of evolutionary biologists as biopolitical (as one might argue all discourses of reproduction or gestation cannot not be) and therefore implicated far beyond the lab or clinic?

If the aim of Sadedin's work is to demonstrate forcefully the pregnancy can mean death or debility – and that geographers should consider this as a political necessity for expanding critical engagement with pregnancy (brought-to-term, avoided, lost or terminated) – then it would be helpful to also consider how Sadedin's reading of pregnancy also offers a quite familiar account of the maternal/fetal antagonism that underwrites the structural violence aimed at birth givers who don't conform to norms of maternal generosity. This would also entail considering carefully and precisely how characterizing pregnancy in terms of 'generosity' – a term the essay seeks to trouble – might position the bodies of birth givers in different ways in relationship to institutions that enact structural violence on gestating and birthing bodies. Perhaps what the work of maternal generosity also seeks to do rhetorically is counter the characterisation of gestation as a naturally unfolding process of competition and antagonism that underwrites all human beginnings, with the caveat that not all acts of generosity, or perhaps better, hospitality, are welcomed or even possible as such (Aristarkhova 201). Pregnancy is hardly presented in modern medical contexts as an entirely risk-free process and access to medical expertise can mean life or death. Yet the biological 'facts' Sadedin describes are contested - not in the sense that pre-eclampsia should be described wholly as a 'social construction' - but rather insofar as the model of struggle between gestating body and fetus helps justify particular social dramas and reveals a vision of humans as species over evolutionary time. Sadedin's account is presented by Lewis as a counter-claim to the presentation of pregnancy as a 'gentle' event and thus to the presumably dominant presentation of the experiences of pregnant people as 'natural.' But I'm not entirely convinced Sadedin's account of maternal-fetal agonism (or antagonism) accounts for what is most violent about pregnancy – or is the most effective way to substantiate Lewis's compelling claims that the site of the uterine and the bodily contingencies of gestation and birth must be made more complex or more sensitive to difference. What work do stories of maternal/fetal 'violence' or 'generosity' or 'hospitality' do in a broader social and political field? Does the uterine trope of 'holding and letting go' effectively circumvent this biopolitical terrain? I am interested in how the essay's intention to bring the undoing and remaking of bodies and subjects at work in gestation might be better accomplished through some accounts – and some concepts – rather than others.

But this is after all a minor point of disagreement with a rich and thoughtful essay that makes a series of convincing claims: that researchers on social reproduction have more to say to theorists of pregnancy, that surrogacy be considered alongside theorisations of the 'maternal,' that pregnancy doesn't only occur to those

who desire to be pregnant, identify as women, or embrace their pregnant state as a pleasurable, life-affirming event. That the body does not always do what one wants it to do is one lesson of gestation and birth. 'What do we do about this?' is as Lewis describes it, the more pressing question. On this subject, I think this essay raises timely questions. It calls for organising alternative ways of theorizing the biological in relation to the cultural, political-economic, and social. In seeking to queer reproduction and to extend the lively and generative debates on hybridity to gestation, it succeeds in making pregnancy and birth, in Nelson's words, 'strange and wild.' This is an effort that tends to get lost in the compartmentalised approach to pregnancy that characterises much of the theoretical work on maternity, reproduction, and the body, to consider any of the myriad sites in which pregnancy and birth might be empirically and conceptually studied – and this is of course not just a problem for geographers. And there are several instances where the essay raises the possibilities of a 'non-gynocentric gestational politics,' for example in the claim that "that 'uterine' relations are fundamentally cyborg, animatedly laboring, and collectively spatial" (Lewis 2017, 4).

What does a 'uterine geography' offer for thinking about the body, sex, reproduction, pregnancy, birth, afterbirth, care, pain and love in new ways? There is a conceptual richness to the refrain throughout the essay that the uterine implies 'holding and letting go,' recalling Sara Ruddick's articulation of the preservative love of mothering as 'holding,' the task of preserving the child's life, as well as Nancy Scheper-Hughes' rejoinder to Ruddick in which mothering under conditions of poverty and disease means 'letting go' (see Ruddick 1989, Scheper-Hughes 1993, also O'Reilly and Ruddick 2009). The essay's call for a non-gynocentric gestational politics of holding and letting go as instances of a 'uterine geography' came through most powerfully in the discussion of the STAR House and GynePunk, where they illustrate how the 'uterine' might be usefully decoupled from a heteronormative and pro-natalist view of pregnancy. But I also want to know more about how the uterine does something, in these and other examples, that 'care' or 'social reproduction' (or the refusal of reproduction) don't do. Is the uterine a metaphor? A material-semiotic assemblage? Something else? Or all of these? The uterine geography presented here seems to recall the efforts to think the body as both the site of sensible difference that is at the same time a transcendental difference operating at the level of the imaginary – where the uterine is something both of and more than the body (on the 'sensible transcendental' see Luce Irigaray 1993). And despite how much of the essay I enthusiastically agree with, and think will generate debate, I also wonder whether the 'uterine geography' described here needs to be more explicitly conveyed in relation to other conceptual possibilities – is this about including everything about 'holding and letting go' in a single 'uterine' frame? Or about generating an entirely new way of thinking through disparate subfields of health/feminist/social geography that can take into account a wider framing of what it means to be, or to refuse to be, or to be unable to be 'reproductive'? I ask these questions because it seems clear that seeking to decouple the uterus as organ from a specific anatomical understanding of the body is viewed as a way to open up political possibilities – as feminist theorists of the brain (Wilson 2004), gut (Wilson 2015) and heart (Pollack 2015) suggest.

The essay calls for geographers to write different stories of the risks and the pain of gestating and giving birth, to accompany those accounts of finding affirmation in one's body when that body has been viewed as passive, instrumentalised and incapable rather than full of potentiality and possibility. If the uterine is the holding on and letting go that is part of biological-social-ecological contingencies of all kinds,

then yes, let us explore and experiment with a uterine geography. If the uterine is another way of thinking with the 'biological' then this essay persuades me that we do not know precisely what this biology is…yet! Lewis thus suggests an urgent and important task: to find generative and more complex ways to think the body anew.

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